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NEA/ELA  
NSC FOR MARCHESE  
PRM/ANE FOR RICHARD ALBRIGHT  
PRM/A FOR TERRY REICH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2017

TAGS: PHUM PREF PREL SY IZ JO

SUBJECT: IRAQI REFUGEE DEMARCHE DELIVERED TO THE SARG

REF: STATE 64886

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.5 b/d

¶11. (C) Summary. Demonstrating continued MFA gestures on the specific issue of Iraqi refugees, Deputy FM Mikdad's office director Hussam A'ala met Charge May 17 to receive Reftel demarche. A'ala asked that the USG intervene with the GOI to speed along assistance for the Iraqi population in Syria. A'ala commented that the SARG was studying the non-paper that A/S Sauerbrey provided D/FM Mikdad in Geneva and would communicate its decision on allowing the Direct Access Program to operate in Syria as soon as the review was complete. A'ala noted MFA concern that IOM should consider hiring and training Syrians instead of bringing in "outside expertise." On NGO assistance, he seemed receptive "as long as we know plans in advance," and A'ala asked that any US-based NGOs interested in operating in Syria apply at the Syrian embassy in Washington to obtain permission. We believe the decision on the Direct Access Program is out of the hands of the MFA and with the security services for approval. Nevertheless, we will continue to follow up with A'ala. End summary.

¶12. (C) Breaking with the SARG's usual practice of ignoring our requests for meetings with anyone except the MFA chief of protocol Dr. Amir Smadi, Charge was granted a meeting with Deputy FM Faisal Mikdad's office director, Hussam al-Din A'ala to deliver reftel demarche. Obviously speaking on instructions, A'ala welcomed the opportunity to follow-up on the "dialogue" started in Damascus and continued "in Geneva." A'ala asked for our views on how the GOI planned to help its citizens in Syria. A'ala commented that in addition to being promised specifics by the Iraqis at the Geneva conference in mid-April, the SARG had raised the issue of assistance for Iraqis in Syria with Iraqi President Talabani and Vice President Hashemi during their respective visits to Damascus earlier this year. A'ala complained that the SARG had yet to receive any specifics on how the GOI planned to provide assistance to include how the USD 25 million pledged by the GOI in Geneva would be disbursed. He commented that it was important that the GOI start taking "the issue more seriously." The Charge said that he had recently met with the new Iraqi Charge d'Affaires, Hasan Shawadi Abdel Aziz, who commented that he had been sent to Syria because his predecessor had not done a good enough job in taking care of the Iraqi community in Syria. A'ala noted this with interest but made no comment.

¶3. (C) A'ala acknowledged receipt of the non-paper describing the Direct Access Program and said he had participated in discussions of the non-paper in Geneva. A'ala commented that the SARG was actively studying the USG request and had dialogued with IOM in Damascus about its plan for implementing Direct Access in Syria. He declined to specify when an answer could be expected but commented that he hoped it would be soon. A'ala promised to communicate the SARG's answer to the Charge as well as communicating it to IOM.

¶4. (C) A'ala noted that the USG had also asked the SARG to issue visas for the DHS/USCIS team. He said D/FM Mikdad had noted "visa reciprocity" in Geneva when A/S Sauerbrey raised the issue of visas for the team, but had approved the DHS/USCIS team's visas. The Charge commented that now that the visas had been issued, the arrival of the DHS/USCIS team on May 21 should be used as an opportunity to provide an answer for the larger question of the SARG's support for the Direct Access program. A'ala promised to follow-up on the issue. Further, A'ala acknowledged the potential security concerns for IOM associated with the new program if it were to begin in Syria and underscored what he described as the SARG's good cooperation with IOM.

¶5. (C) A'ala welcomed USG assistance to Iraqi refugees but asked that the USG follow-up with the GOI to get it to move forward with assistance as well. A'ala said NGOs could operate in Syria but asked that any interested in doing so present their specific proposals to Syrian embassies overseas. A'ala said once NGOs applied for permission at an embassy, the SARG would study their proposal and communicate to the NGO next steps for proceeding with their project. A'ala commented that the SARG has a strong record of allowing legitimate NGOs with a humanitarian objectives to operate in Syria, which was borne out by events during the Lebanese war last summer, he asserted.

¶6. (C) Relating to visas for OPE staff, A'ala said he understood IOM wanted to bring in outside expertise to assist with their operations in Syria but commented that the Syrian concern (which he clarified would not prejudice the decision one way or the other) was that IOM should hire more local Syrians. A'ala said the SARG had raised the need to hire more local Syrians with IOM Director Brunson McKinley in Geneva.

¶7. Comment. A'ala's presentation (and separate indications we have received) suggest the decision on the Direct Access Program is with the security services. We have no indication what the decision will be (although the MFA was forward-leaning with its meeting with us) but we will continue to press the MFA for an early response. We do not know how to read the NGO process proposed by A'ala given septel report that the Syrian Red Crescent is working as a conduit for NGOs. We will explore this further with NGOs here.

CORBIN